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The Isthmus Reacts, Supporting Us Demonstrations For Humane Migrant Reforms

by Mike Leffert

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For much of the world, May Day, May 1, is International Labor Day, but it is generally ignored by a US citizenry unmindful that it is a tradition born in Chicago in commemoration of the Haymarket Riots of 1886. May 1, 2006, however, saw a significant change in the pattern as many thousands of immigrant workers brought the celebration back home to protest a bill in the US House of Representatives that seeks to criminalize the efforts of Latin Americans and others crossing the US border without documentation.

The workers, most from Mexico (see SourceMex, 2006-05-03) and Central America, demonstrated in the largest US cities with the intention of showing not only the strength of their numbers but also the importance of their contribution to the US economy. Their absence from farms and fields, kitchens and construction sites, packinghouses and the front yards of the affluent was felt nationwide, with some businesses shutting down for lack of labor. For a day, roofs went unpatched, lettuce unpicked, chickens unplucked, dishes unwashed. The workers were in the streets demanding that they, like the generations of workers who came before them, be respected for their labor and their aspirations for a better life.

The workers' efforts drew support in their countries of origin, where people turned out in the streets to protest the meanspiritedness of the northern colossus that requires the work, but withholds respect from those who risk life and limb to work there and send home money to support their families. Protests in Central America focused on this issue, but also included other frustrations, like the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) that threatens their livelihoods.

In preparation for protests, thousands in Guatemala received emails during the preceding weeks asking them to boycott US products and businesses. Union and campesino organizations used the print and broadcast media as well to encourage citizens to stay away for a day from Wal-Mart Guatemala, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Burger King, Pizza Hut, McDonald's, and any other business or product linked to US ownership.

The only thing gringo is the brand

The campaign drew sharp opposition from these businesses. Calling the campaign counterproductive, Jose Raul Gonzalez, vice president of Cabcorp, Central America's Pepsi bottler, said, "Consumers do not know that this 'gringo' product is as Guatemalan as they are; the only thing gringo is the brand." In the case of Pepsi, like other carbonated soda, the sugar is national, the glass bottles and caps are of Guatemalan manufacture, or at least from Mexico, Panama, El Salvador, Uruguay, or Puerto Rico. The argument extends to the other US brands.

Wal-Mart sells goods made in Latin America (see NotiCen, 2006-03-23). McDonald's buys its bread from the Guatemalan Panifica, its lettuce from small producers in San Jose Chirijuyu, Chimaltenango, tomatoes and cucumbers from the Verapazes, and its meat from the national slaughterhouse Procasa.

Says Gonzalez, "We ignore the economic impact the boycott can have," emphasizing Wal-Mart's 13,000 employees in the country, Cabcorp's 3,500, Burger King's 1,100, and another 7,000 working for Coke and McDonalds. "We don't oppose the grievances of the migrants, but if they believe that they are going to screw (joder) the gringos by not consuming 'American' products, they are wrong, they will only affect the companies, their workers, providers, and themselves causing more poverty and adding to the causes of their emigration."

Julian Villasenor of S.O.S Inmigracion Internacional found the argument a bit overwrought. "I feel sorry for them; while the franchises are gringa, we ask that no one consume their products in solidarity with the chapines [Guatemalans] who are there, so that they feel the difference in income for one day, which is not going to break them." Protest leaders admonished participants not to drink sodas during the May Day march. Jose Pinzon, union leader, recommended lemonade.

The isthmus is watching Central Americans at home maintained a keen interest in the US demonstrations, whether they attended marches or not. The Guatemalan organizers worked closely with counterparts in the US to coordinate activities. Joviel Acevedo said he had met with representatives of the National Coalition of Guatemalan Immigrants in the United States (ConGuate), an organization that advocates for immigrants in the US.

Founded in 1998, ConGuate coalesces about 25 organizations. "The chief concern in the agenda is immigration reform," says its Web site. ConGuate estimated in 2004 that 1.5 million Guatemalans live in the US. More than half are undocumented. ConGuate has joined with the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC), seeking to legalize immigrants through community organizing, leadership development, congressional lobbying, and media outreach.

In Guatemala, ConGuate has worked to keep the migration issue on the front burner and claims some credit for the government having created a deputy ministry for human rights and migrant affairs. The organization has a signed agreement with the Procurador de Derechos Humanos to monitor and protect migrant's rights.

In El Salvador, thousands turned out in support of the action of their compatriots in the US. The protest had the support of the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), the powerful leftist party, but was somewhat hampered by police, who for a time stopped busloads of people from the interior from joining the demonstration in San Salvador. The marchers added anti-CAFTA rhetoric to the protest agenda, with shouts of "No to the FTA [free-trade agreement] with the United States," and calls for salary raises, job creation, ratification of the International Labor Organization (ILO) convention, and change in the government's economic and social policy.

They carried signs reading, "Don't eat gringo products," "Out with transnationals that exploit Salvadorans," and "We don't want to be an American Colony." As in Guatemala, leaders exhorted the crowds to boycott US products for a day.

Leader Lorena Martinez of the Bloque Popular de Resistencia (BPR) told the media that no human being is illegal and that "we are with them all in this great battle they have, that we are sure that united we are going to win against this great power." Martinez also took on President Antonio Saca in her remarks to the press. She chided him for bragging about his friendship with US President George W. Bush and asked why, if he is so close to the US president, he doesn't do something about the plight of the migrants. "It is precisely Saca who is promoting the expulsion of all these Salvadorans who leave the country, because they have no work opportunity, no good education, and they don't have the health and the hope to live here," she said.

The FMLN took the opportunity to get in some comments about US treatment of Salvadoran workers. The US has "a false morality, because it demands that other countries respect workers' rights, while they are violated in that nation," said party leader Nadia Diaz. In Honduras, some 40,000 workers in Tegucigalpa demonstrated in solidarity with their conationals in the US. They carried signs demanding permanent residence for them. Another 30,000 demonstrated in San Pedro Sula, the country's second-largest city.

There the protest linked migrant rights with CAFTA. In a speech, Carlos Reyes, leader of the Bloque Popular, told the crowd, "CAFTA, as well as the neoliberal measures imposed by the US and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are directly responsible for the unemployment and migrations. Therefore, the US has the obligation not to deport them but to welcome them, and not to criminalize their migratory status." Reyes called upon the people to observe a boycott for the day on US goods and businesses.

Nicaragua was witness on May Day to the most rare of events. President Enrique Bolanos and Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega seemed to be very much on the same page regarding the rights of Nicaraguan workers in the US. Bolanos said he was hoping that the emigrants would succeed in getting the immigration reforms they sought. Ortega said, "Today hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans are defending their rights in the US. For them, our solidarity, and un abrazo filled with our hopes."

May Day demonstrations in Costa Rica and Panama also touched on the migratory issue, and centered on anti-CAFTA themes. In these Central American countries the boycott appears to have been moderately successful; receipts were down for the targeted businesses, the point was made, and no one went broke. In the US, too, organizers claimed success, but so did opponents, who predicted a "backlash." About the only discernable reaction came from the anti-immigrant Minuteman Project, which patrols the US-Mexico border to thwart undocumented people's attempts to cross.

The organization announced a ten-day convoy that would cross the country holding rallies in selected cities. They said their purpose was to counter the impact made by the weekend's huge

rallies, even though there are barely 100 of them planning to ride along. The convoy will pass through Crawford, Texas, near President Bush's ranch, and end up in Washington, DC, on May 12.

It may be too early to judge the ultimate effect of the May Day mobilization. The movement showed that it could build an organization, mobilize hundreds of thousands of people, and wield economic power, but there is so far no indication that it changed any votes in the Congress. Backlash theorists say that the positions of lawmakers in the lower house might even have been hardened by the demonstrations, decreasing the likelihood of an accommodation with the more moderate Senate. But it may take longer to determine whether the demonstrations will encourage equally large demonstrations on other matters.

Some US commentators have likened the May Day turnout to the days of the protests against the Vietnam War. The current US expedition in Iraq may be just as unpopular as was its predecessor in the 1960s, but it has as yet failed to produce an equivalent public response. Another open question is whether the Latin Americans, with their modest one-day work stoppage, might have reawakened a taste among US activists for the idea of a national general strike like the one generated by the Haymarket Riots, which eventually resulted in the eight-hour workday.

Reconsidering the general strike

General strikes have been effective in Latin America and in Europe but have not been successfully organized in the US for decades. With this modest one-day work stoppage, Mexicans and Central Americans have indicated that the economic machine can be seriously slowed with far less participation than might have been imagined, and they have done so at a time when increasing numbers of US citizens, according to polls, believe that their government responds more to powerful economic interests than to their own individual interests. The concurrent boycott south of the border indicates that, with the US dependent on international trade, a multiplier effect might put the economy in a hostage situation.

Randall Jonson, vice president of the US Chamber of Commerce, lent some credence to the concept. "This was a one-day deal. If immigrants decided to abandon their jobs for two weeks, that would definitely have an impact," he said. The Chamber supports the legalization of migrants. A more definitive test of workers' economic power may become the most attractive option for dissenters on this and on other issues. The moral aspects, fairness and respect, do not particularly move the public.

The Pew Hispanic Center, a nonpartisan research group in Washington, DC, did a survey in March and found that 53% of respondents said people who are in the US illegally should be required to go home. Just 40% said the immigrants should have legal status allowing them to stay. By most estimates, about 11.5 million undocumented immigrants are in the US, of whom 75% were born in Latin America. Most enter across the southern US border, and 40% have been in the US five years or less. Most live in California, Texas, and Florida.

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